

SIGUE ADELANTE!

LIVING THE BRACERO PROGRAM, 1941-1964

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Sigue Adelante!

Living the Bracero Program, 1941-1964.

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Literature Review

This research concentrates on the personal effects of a policy titled the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was a guest worker program in the United States that allowed Mexican men to be contracted to work in low-paying jobs in the food and railroad industries.¹ While the Bracero Program, instituted in 1942, was intended to address the labor shortage during World War II, however, the program continued until 1964 because employers grew to rely on migrant-labor.²

A central problem with the Bracero Program was the reality that braceros earned far less than the average American agricultural worker. Galarza and Mitchell note within their writings that although braceros were promised the comparable pay, they seldom received such levels of payment and at times received no payment at all.³ In fact, in *Harvest of Loneliness*, and *Defiant*

¹ "About", *Bracero History Archive*, April 7, 2019, <http://braceroarchive.org/about>.

² Ibid.

³ Don Mitchell, "*La Casa De Esclavos Modernos: Exposing the Architecture of Exploitation.*", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71, no. 4 (2012), 451
Galarza, Ernesto. *Strangers in our Fields*, 13.

Braceros, wives of the Braceros give their testimonies saying that while their husbands and sons sent the remittances they could, it was still not enough to support the family's basic necessities.⁴

Within the program, braceros were promised adequate housing and insurance, however, they soon discovered that those commodities were deducted from their paychecks.⁵ Oftentimes, their housing were consisted of frail, dilapidated structures buildings without toilet paper, and because their pay was so low, they would not be able to pay for insurance.⁶ Braceros were dehumanized routinely by being forced to live in terrible conditions, having their wages stolen, and working under severe conditions.

The process of becoming a bracero was trying. In order to get contracted, Braceros travelled from every state in Mexico to specific contracting stations.⁷ Before they started to work, braceros were sprayed by unknown chemicals to them to fumigate their bodies.⁸ The men would also work long hours (from sunrise to sunset), and an injury would just be a disturbance they would have to set aside. If a bracero complained about payments or working conditions, their demands would simply be ignored. Moreover, as braceros were struggling to provide for their family, their families suffered from the separation.⁹ Wives felt as if they were losing their husbands and sons because if they needed extra help, their sons would sign up for the program as well even if they were underage.¹⁰ It is important to know the struggles felt by these families in order to understand the fact that the Bracero Program played more than just an economic role for the United States and Mexico.

⁴ Gilbert Gonzalez, Vivian Price, and Adrian Salinas. *Harvest of Loneliness.*, min 30:45

⁵ Don Mitchell, *"La Casa De Esclavos Modernos: Exposing the Architecture of Exploitation."*, 452.

⁶ Ibid, 455.

⁷ Loza, Mireya. *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, The University of Chapel Hill Press, 2016), 68.

⁸ "Dehumanization of Braceros", *The Bracero Program*, April 7, 2019, <https://thebraceroprogram.weebly.com/dehumanization.html>.

⁹ Loza. *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*, 70.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Bracero Program affected immigration from Mexico in the United States. Throughout the course of the program, almost 5 million Braceros came to the U.S. and Braceros who were contracted several times, established social ties within the country over time.¹¹ Massey, Durand, and Malone state in their book *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, “Between 1942 and 1965 hundreds of braceros were able to familiarize themselves with U.S. employment practices, become comfortable with U.S. job routines, master American ways of life and learn English.”¹² Therefore, with the combination of the 20,000 annual visit limits in annual quotas and the end of the program, many Braceros started going into the U.S. without documentation which led to an increase in undocumented migration.¹³

In Mexico, the Bracero Program reinforced patriarchal structures within families because though the remittances allowed their families to survive, men were expected to be the providers for their family even if it meant withstanding exploitive labor conditions. The Mexican government saw the Bracero Program as a possible way for Mexico to continue to modernize.¹⁴ To modernize Mexico, the Mexican government sought to change the way of living for poor mestizo and indigenous men. Because the program provided a way for indigenous men to be placed in a labor system without cost to Mexico, the Mexican government had further reasons to oblige to the Bracero Program.¹⁵ However, many people in Mexico did not support the program or the men leaving to be contracted- they perceived the men to be “unfaithful husbands and irresponsible fathers.” because being away from their families in a new country would allow Braceros the freedom to explore and have new adventures.¹⁶ Though some Braceros did have the

¹¹ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors, Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*, (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2003),39.

¹² Ibid, 42.

¹³ Ibid, 40.

¹⁴ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 29.

¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

¹⁶ Ibid, 8.

opportunity to have days off and seek enjoyment where they could, many worked six days out of the week and the seventh was spent recuperating for the next one to come.

The living and working conditions the Braceros faced has been studied thoroughly, as well as the effects the Bracero program had on the U.S. economy and immigration. However, I am interested in the personal effects of this policy, and bringing to light personal stories in order for the history to be woven by the people who experienced it firsthand. Sharing these personal stories will break the silence surrounding the Bracero Program, allow us to connect these past events to present issues, and makes building its collective history possible.

Thesis Statement

My project aims to humanize the policies of the program, and let the history of the Bracero Program be told by the people who experienced it themselves. Sharing histories unearths the past. It eases existing wounds and allows us to create a society that does not continue to inflict the same violence on fellow human-beings. Examining the history of the bracero movement through the memories of braceros allows us to understand the humanity within inhumanity and establish a collective memory to see the connection between the past and the present.

Theoretical Framework

To tackle this project, I will use oral histories to give a voice to the lived experience of the Braceros, ethno-poetic translation to convey the emotions felt by the Braceros, and memory to account for the ways Braceros coped with what they lived through.

Project Description

My goal is to give Braceros a chance to tell their own history so their stories are not lost. On the rare chance that the Bracero Program comes up in historical research, classes, and conversations, the focus remains on the policies and economic benefit of having these men work during World War II- not the long hours they remained in the sun, the toll being bent over took on their backs, and the small remittances they would send to their family. My methods for this project include listening to oral histories from Braceros, their mothers, wives, and children, as well as using secondary source material to contextualize the effects the program had on Mexico's indigenous and lower class.

This paper consists of the three chapters retelling, through ethno-poetic translation, the experiences of three people who have contrasting emotional connections to the Bracero Program. Chapter one, *El Comienzo*, meaning the start, focuses on Erasmo Corral's journey toward being able to share his experience as a Bracero. Chapter two, *Retrocediendo Dos Pasos*, dives into Petra Sanchez's inability to share her memories connected to the Bracero program. Finally, chapter three, *La Resolucion*, is told through Cuauhtémoc Madrid's desire to share every aspect of the Bracero Program he can remember.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Lilia and Roberto Fernandez, for their unconditional love and support is my motivation.

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KEY WORDS

The Bracero Program, Bracero, oral histories, performance, ethno-poetic translation.

INTRODUCTION

Erasmus Corral was one of 4.6 million Braceros who worked in the United States as part of the Bracero Program.¹⁷ The Bracero Program allowed Mexican men to have temporary work contracts to labor in low-paying agricultural jobs. Lasting from 1942-1964 the Bracero Program was initially meant to address a shortage of workers in the food industry during World War II.¹⁸ As a result, however, agricultural jobs began to be labeled as migrant work, and Braceros went from being seen as helpers to foreign invaders. The change in the way Braceros were perceived allowed employers to exploit the labor of braceros while simultaneously establishing the grounds for our current system of food production.¹⁹ Having been contracted twice, Erasmo had two distinct experiences within the same program that shaped the way he processed and talked about his memories. Though he starts off hesitant to share, throughout his narrative, Erasmo renders the adversities he faced the second time he was contracted to be a Bracero, and the ways he confronted them. His story veiled by silence, eventually reveals acts of bravery.

Within this paper, I will connect the experiences of three people, Erasmo Corral, Petra Sanchez, and Cuauhtémoc Madrid, through the way different ways silence plays a role in how they process being in the Bracero program. Petra Sanchez, the wife of a Bracero, lived alongside her husband while he worked in El Paso and claims, “Well, I don’t think- he never said anything. Never said a thing.”²⁰ When she was asked about her husband’s experience as a Bracero. Petra decided to not offer their shared memories of the program. Cuauhtémoc Madrid was contracted

¹⁷ Interview with Erasmo Corral by Cristina Berumen, 2008, "Interview no. 1409," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

¹⁸ “About”, *Bracero History Archive*, April 7, 2019, <http://braceroarchive.org/about>.

¹⁹ Don Mitchell, *"La Casa De Esclavos Modernos: Exposing the Architecture of Exploitation"*, 458.

²⁰ Interview with Petra Sanchez by Marina Kalashnicova, 2008, "Interview no. 1377," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

to work in the cotton fields of Arizona.²¹ The positivity radiated from his voice when he expressed, “I feel proud, because Bracero refers to the arm, we were the arms of this country.” Cuauhtémoc found it necessary to talk about every experience he had during his contract because he did not want to let his past circumstances determine his present mental state.

Just like Cuauhtémoc, I believe the silence surrounding the Bracero Program should be broken, and personal histories should be shared. Sharing histories unearths the past. It eases existing wounds and allows us to create a society that does not continue to inflict the same violence on fellow human-beings. Examining the history of the Bracero movement through the memories of Braceros allows us to understand the humanity within inhumanity and establish a collective memory to see the connection between the past and the present.

The oral histories that I use in these pages, made possible with Mireya Loza’s Bracero Oral History Project, evaluate the personal effects the policies had on the Braceros and their families. The Bracero Oral History Project consisted of interviewing and collecting over 700 stories from men all over Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, I will be using ethno-poetic translation to retell these stories and ensure their revival is as impactful and true as their original *disposition*. Historian Rivka Syd Eisner states, “Memory seeks mobility within, across and through time and living bodies. Without movement, it may become static and forgotten. Memory must move or die.”²² Retelling these personal stories keeps the memory of the Bracero program from dying, and instead transforms what have been hidden narratives into a collective memory.

²¹ Interview with Cuauhtémoc Z. Madrid by Anaís Acosta, 2008, "Interview no. 1354," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²² Rivka Syd Eisner, *Remembering Toward Loss: Performing And so there are pieces...*, (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 104.

CHAPTER I

ERASMO CORRAL

El Comienzo

Though every experience is unique, each person's history within these pages contributes to the understanding of what it meant to live the Bracero Program. Some people's experience is told through silence, some through tales of adventure, most describe moments of suffering and hardship, but they are all connected through the act of having to manage what it meant to live through the Bracero Program.

Like many guest worker programs that have occurred in the United States, the Bracero Program is one that is often not known about. The lack of public visibility for the Bracero Program can be attributed to several phenomenon from the fact that consciously thinking about migrant workers- typically the people who grow our crops- can result in feelings of shame and guilt, to the fact that access to this information is limited to spaces of education and academia because Braceros and their family are not the people who are regularly thought of as American; therefore not present in mainstream avenues of education. However, the silence that keeps the Bracero Program invisible/unnoticed by the public eye, is also experienced by the Braceros themselves. Actively talking about what oftentimes is a traumatic experience is emotionally taxing, especially for Latino males who are indoctrinated to suppress their emotions.

"No..."

"No..."

"No..."

"No, I don't remember..."

“No, not any of that...”

“Well, it’s just that I don’t remember, but...”

“But I don’t remember everything else...”

From the quotes shown above, Erasmo Corral’s story illustrates how it emerged with his difficulty acknowledging/recalling the experiences he lived. Retelling memories commonly requires experiencing the moments being described once again including any emotion connected to those memories. For Erasmo, opening up about his story took time, effort, courage, and letting himself be unguarded.

Erasmo Corral was born in 1914 in Durango to an agriculture worker father and a stay at home mom. Coming from a humble background, Erasmo did not attend school and started working when he was eight years old by taking care of cows in his town. Before he heard about the Bracero Program, Erasmo had already been working in agriculture, and was married. Erasmo ultimately decided to go to the United States to provide financially for his family. At the age of 29, Erasmo became a Bracero in the year 1943, and was contracted once again after WWII had ended.

Before describing the more intricate experiences he went through, Erasmo starts to explain how many years he worked as a Bracero, and types of jobs he worked:

“Well, the years, I cannot remember,

Like I said, it was around 1943,

It was a six-month contract,

For six months,

I was a working man, see?

I behaved well.”

“What was it that you would do?”

“Well, I grabbed the shovel,

When I arrived, I grabbed the shovel and hook.

Then, that’s it.

And I would help the steward, see?

We would pave the way, yep.

So, he, the steward, would align one side,

And I the other.

Then, I worked in the commissary.

I would work as a traffic conductor too,

After being a traffic conductor, they put me in charge of the commissary,

After that, I left,

I left to Mexico.”

The two major jobs that Braceros were involved with were agriculture and working on the railroads, but some, like Erasmo, would have other tasks as well. As soon as Braceros were assigned a contract, they would be on their way to their work destination. Sometimes their work destinations were close to the contracting centers in Sonora, but some travelled for days by bus. The major states for Bracero work in were Texas and California. For most Braceros, working in the United States was done with the intention of making more money than they were capable of making in their hometowns in Mexico to improve their living situation. Like Erasmo, most Braceros returned to Mexico after their contracts finished.

Erasmo’s story continues:

“How would they treat you in the ranch?”

“I’m going to say well.

Why would I complain?

To me, they would treat me very well.”

“How does it feel when they call you Bracero?”

“Well, it was a normal word that was used,

And to this day I use it as a Bracero,

And to address other Braceros.”

“But how do you feel?”

“No, I don’t feel offended.”

“In general, are your memories working as a Bracero positive or negative?”

“They were positive, that’s why I worked.”

“Did being a Bracero change your life in any way?”

“No.”

“How was the food?”

“Well it was good.

The food was good,

Well, during that time was when-

During World War II,

Everyone treated the people very well,

Then, with the second round of Braceros, it stopped.

The second round of Braceros, during 1960,

They treated them badly.”

The way Erasmo initially answers these questions is very matter-of-factly and almost dismissive. When asked about the way he was treated, Erasmo insists there was nothing to complain about, in fact, he claims he was treated well. Erasmo also says he does not feel offended when people call him a Bracero, but by answering in this way he avoids having to express how he feels about being called a Bracero in general. Moving forward from the initial answers, there's a certain desire to speak up that can be noted when he was asked about the quality of food he was served. The transition from talking about how good the food was to the way Braceros were treated after World War II is not smooth. It stands out. Erasmo is dropping puzzle pieces slowly. It is also important to note that when Erasmo says, "They treated them badly," he is separating himself from the rest of the Braceros which points to a dissonance in his mind that plays when he remembers unjust events. The Bracero Program was advertised in the United States as a way to tackle the food shortage that was occurring because men were overseas; however, the program continued until 1964 a long time after the war ended. After WWII, Braceros were no longer seen as a help in the United States, they were seen as foreign workers taking away jobs from Americans.²³ Due to the shift in ideology surrounding the Bracero Program, many Braceros experienced an increase in unfair treatments if they worked after WWII. Erasmo's story demonstrates the impact those negative sentiments had on his second time being contracted.²⁴

When Erasmo is asked, "Is there anything else you would like to say or add, an anecdote or something you would like to say?" Erasmo senses that his opportunity to speak will end, and he decides to put his experience out on display altogether.

²³ Cohen, Deborah. *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 23.

²⁴ Ibid.

“When I heard that they wanted Braceros again,

I, well, my opinion is,

I gave my opinion,

Truthfully,

Because that time we went to Mississippi,

They treated us like animals.”

Erasmo carefully chooses the way he characterizes his experience when he uses the phrase “my opinion” twice. As if he does not want to draw significance to the fact that he felt they were treated like animals. For Erasmo, being treated like an animal was not part of the contract and because it was only in Mississippi, it was not a typical occurrence Braceros encountered.

“How?”

“Because we were in a truck stacked up like pigs.

We got there malnourished.

They would hardly ever give us food

...it took three days to get to our destination,

It didn’t have any seats,

And very bad food,

We got there, and they put us to pick cotton

We would pick leftovers,

We couldn’t pick anything,

So, we had a strike,

I was the representative of the strike,

And I won it!

So, it was then that they gave us fresh rows to pick”

Erasmo’s truth echoed loudly. Erasmo had previously pointed out that he was a well behaved, hard-working man, and when he had been asked if he had been a part of a labor strike, he denied it.

“Did you or any of your partners organize a labor strike?”

“No, there, none, not there.”

However, the key in his response lies in the fact that he said, “...not there” indicating that Erasmo did not see his omission of the strike as a lie, but as a way to separate the parts of his story he felt were incidences every Bracero went through from the parts that were an exception- his second time in Mississippi during his second contract. All of a sudden, a different person starts emerging in my mind from this new insight, the image of a well-behaved Erasmo that he felt the need to convey turns into the image of a person much stronger, courageous person. Conceptualizing an Erasmo who went from a worker who went along with the steward’s orders to one that led a strike that resulted in the improvement of working conditions for him and his comrades correlates with the way he evolved when speaking his narrative.

The strike process then unfolds:

“In what way did you form a strike?”

“Well, we made an agreement with men who already picked, right?

They were familiar with the work,

There were cotton pickers who had already done it,

So, we agreed that we were going to strike,

So they would pay us or give us a new field,

And so, we all united and everyone at the same time,

Did not show up to work,
... and because we did not go to work,
The man in charge of immigration,
Went to see why we had not gone into work,
And then we started,
It took two days, up to two days to convince him.
I told him that since he was familiar with the work,
To tell me how many pounds of cotton could be picked,
He said, "No, there it is already picked."
And that is how.
So, after that, I grabbed him and said,
"Look, now that we resolved the field issue,
Come with me,"
So, I showed him where we cooked,
It was basically only a pot,
So, he made him install a gas stove,
One big enough for two people.
I told him, "Look, this is how we navigate,"
I told him, "I have been contracted other times,
And they gave me blankets, they gave me a bed,
And look where we are, look where we have our food."
So, he did not like that,
He got after our employer and told him,

“Look, you have to treat these men like men,
And give them everything they need,
If not, I won’t let you have not even one man.”

“And how long did you work in Mississippi?”

“Well, I don’t remember,
We were there for about 40 days,
And there was still about five more to go,
But it started to rain,
And I couldn’t get work,
So, I left.”

“Did the employers get mad when you left?”

He got mad at me,
Because as I was the representative of the strike,
Well they made him, the one in charge of immigration,
Made sure we got paid,
And that we got a new field,
So, he didn’t look at me fondly.”

Through this anecdote, we can see how Erasmo and his colleagues worked together to organize and get their demands met. Their strategy was to grab the attention of someone who was familiar with the task of cotton picking and with the position to demand changes, and it was executed flawlessly. By showing the immigration officer the empty rows of cotton, they were left to pick, Erasmo paved the way for new fields to be allotted to the Braceros. Furthermore, Erasmo was quick on his feet and went beyond demanding for better working conditions by demanding

better living conditions. Taking the immigration officer directly to their sleeping chambers and their kitchen, Erasmo was able to back the officer into a corner where they could not ask for further proof- it was all there. The wooden boards where they slept, the single pot they were given to cook with; it was undeniable that Erasmo and his fellow men deserved a change, and by working together they proved the improvement of their working and living conditions was indispensable or their employer would no longer be allowed to contract any Bracero. Unfortunately, Erasmo was left with a target on his back because his employers could no longer exploit the Braceros who worked under him. Erasmo was hesitant to share this accomplishment because although him and his workers got their demands met, it was still a struggle they had to go through at their job when they should have been treated rightfully in the first place.

Erasmo explains the lasting effects of the strike:

Once we started to earn money,

after winning the strike,

Then they gave us a new field.

It was then that we started to make money,

Because we didn't, not even a dollar a day.

So, we barely, at times we didn't even eat with what we made.

The food we ate,

We had to make it ourselves.

We slept on wooden boards.

The food we had there,

It was full of rat shit, and they walked by there, see?

And all of that was like that,

That's how I'm telling you what happened to us there.

I am not adding or subtracting,

I am not adding or taking away,

That is just the reality.

Even though Erasmo has already given out his contribution to devising a strike, he still finds the need to defend his credibility by claiming that he is not trying to make the conditions in Mississippi seem worse than they were- they just were as bad as they sound. Erasmo continues to explain his stances on recreating a Bracero Program in the U.S.

“That's why when, before the collapse of the twin towers,

They were going to give emigration to the Mexicans, remember?

After they collapsed, there was no emigration.

So, when someone from Florida started to say they wanted a Bracero program again,

That is when I gave my opinion to the President,

That I did not want even one Bracero,

Because of what I went through, right?

That no person should be contracted.

They should give them an immigration card,

So the person can go and work wherever they want,

Where they could earn a little more, earn a better salary.

Because everything was like that,

It was how it went,

And don't think they are lies,

That's how it happened to us,

During the second time,
...that is why I wrote the card to the President,
Because I do not want,
In my opinion, because of what had happened,
I did not want it to happen again,
That is all I can explain.”

Erasmo’s silence transforms into a voice that demands others be treated with dignity. At first, silence serves as a tool that allows Erasmo to manage his emotions and memories in a way that helps him be okay with every aspect of the program he lived through. Even though Erasmo does not regret his decision to become a Bracero, he ultimately understands that the wages, working and living conditions should not have been tolerated much less acceptable for the government to have advertised as a sufficient way for Braceros to provide for their family. Being tied to one specific employer without being able to request a change of position put the Braceros in a vulnerable state where they were forced to accept any job with any of the conditions it came with.²⁵ A way to have avoided this exploitation was to have allowed Braceros to have a visa where they have the right to quit a job that is not just. Erasmo realized the importance of having that choice through his struggle of forming a strike, which explains why he expressed that foreign workers should be given a worker visa. Through his resistance, Erasmo demonstrates the strength Braceros have beyond their arms. Que viva la historia de Erasmo, y que viva la huelga. (Long live Erasmo’s story, and long live the strike.)

²⁵ Mitchell, *La Casa de Esclavos Modernos*, 457.

CHAPTER II

PETRA SANCHEZ

Retrocediendo Dos Pasos

Silence takes on a divergent role in Petra Sanchez's story. Throughout her conversation, Petra comes across as very artless when she talks about quotidian memories with her family and husband, yet very reserved when she is asked about her experiences connected with the Bracero program. For Petra, silence is not something she breaks, rather something she uses strategically to guard the memories she keeps private.

Petra Sanchez was born in El Paso, Texas in 1923 into a big family with 17 siblings. Both of Petra's parents dedicated themselves to varying jobs. Her dad was dedicated to growing corn and beans in Durango, Mexico for a while but he also sold clothes and fruit. Although her mom primarily stayed at home where she took care of her children and animals, she also picked fruit in California. Because of her parents' work, Petra and her siblings moved all over the United States and Mexico from Texas to California to Philadelphia to Durango, Zacatecas, and Coahuila. Petra and her siblings were able to attend school, and she completed the sixth grade.

Petra met her husband, Luis Sanchez, in Durango, Mexico. Every day, Petra would go retrieve water from her uncle's house, and Luis happened to work there, so they would see each other often; nevertheless, nothing happened between them until she was invited to a wedding. Petra's dad agreed to let her go only for a little while, but that's all she needed as she was determined to go dance. Petra had another boyfriend at the time whom she thought was waiting dance with her at the wedding; however, when she arrived, Petra saw that he had asked another woman to dance. He proceeded to ask Petra to dance when she arrived, but she did not stand for

that. Petra made it known to him, “No, I am not scraps.” and she started to dance with the young man who eventually became her husband. That same night, Petra and Luis became a couple; they married five months after meeting and were married for 58 years.

Luis became a Bracero in 1946, and Petra joined him in El Paso

“Where did you and your family live? In the farm or in the city?”

“No, we lived there in the ranch,

They had houses there for the workers,

We lived in one house,

There was nothing else,

It was big, but just one big room.”

It was not very usual for Braceros’ wives to live with them in the sites they worked in. In Mexico, women struggled to deal with the distance between them and their husbands because communication was not easy to come by. Distance and lack of communication between husbands and wives often left couples with fears of infidelity, women feared their husbands might become involved with sex workers in the United States, and men feared their wives would not wait for them to return- it was not uncommon for men to leave their wives pregnant before leaving for their contract once again.²⁶ While most women stayed in their hometowns, some women moved closer to the border so that it would be easier for their husbands to visit the family during the weekend because their contracts could vary in length, and whereas some worked for months at a time before going back to Mexico, some worked for longer periods.²⁷

“I think my husband had been working as a Bracero for a year,

When they asked the boss for a raise,

²⁶ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 69.

And he said, well he could not give them a raise,
He said, “What I can do,
Is recommend you to another employer,
He might be able to give you a raise.”
“But,” he said, “You have to go to Mexico,
Stay close to Juarez, so the other man can employ you as Braceros.”
And between all the families, they agreed to do that.”

Being contracted as a Bracero meant that once you were assigned to an employer, you could not ask to be moved if you were not content with the wages and living conditions.²⁸ If, as a Bracero, you wanted another job, you had to go back to Mexico and start the contracting process all over again. With Petra’s story, we can see how Braceros tried to navigate the system in ways that could speed up the process between their next contract. Some employers were more lenient than others, and let their employees search for other job destinations. Other employers left Braceros to fend for themselves, and it was not an uncommon phenomenon for Braceros to leave their job, and look for another one while they were already within the United States; however, without a Bracero contract, that left them classified as undocumented workers which also put them in a vulnerable position where they could be further exploited as workers.²⁹ Because they were not employed under a legal process, there were absolutely no ways for them to report mistreatment. If reporting mistreatment while being a Bracero was difficult, it was impossible as an undocumented worker.

²⁸ Mitchell, *La Casa de Esclavos Modernos*, 457.

²⁹ Ibid, 457,458.

Moreover, Petra and Luis were able to stay together throughout the time Luis was a Bracero, yet the way Petra speaks about the time spent there makes it seem as if she was barely connected to her husband's working experience.

"Did he not tell you about the contracting process so he could become a Bracero?"

"No, I just knew that they would be Braceros,

You know, I guessed it would be for picking cotton."

"And your husband didn't tell you how they treated the workers in the field?"

"Well, no, I don't remember."

"What did he tell you? How was his work? Was it difficult or did he enjoy it?"

"Well he said it was a little difficult,

but he said, "Well, I have to work."

Like that, and then when he started to spray the crops,

You know, once they started to plant the cotton seeds,

He worked nights.

He would spray the crops at night,

The nights would be so cold,

But he worked like that."

"And did he or other men ever complain about their work?"

"No, no, I did not know about that,

If they treated them poorly or not,

I never knew about that,

All I knew was that boss did not want to increase their pay."

It is hard to imagine a wife as thoughtful as Petra, who remembers every moment of the first night they met, to lack any memory of her husband expressing his feelings about the program. Furthermore, the proximity between her and her husband would make it almost impossible to ignore the physical manifestations of the job on her husband's body and the facial expressions he had when he came home every day. It is possible for there to have been a lack of communication between the couple because Mexican men tend to keep hardships to themselves; nevertheless, Petra was aware of those cold nights as Luis sprayed the crops, and as his wife she also knew about the weight that had on his body, but sharing that insight would mean sharing both her and her husband's personal memories. Because her husband had already passed, keeping his hardships private could have been an indication of Petra's way of respecting and honoring his life.

Petra continues to share some aspects of the program:

"And in that town or ranch, did you ever hear about a Bracero being discriminated against?"

"Yes, like always.

Yes, you know, because they had more American privileges,

Than the Mexicans."

"And what did your husband tell you? Did he like working more as a Bracero, or did he enjoy his work more after the program ended? Was there a difference?"

"Well, I don't think so,

He never told me anything.

Never said a thing."

"And was there a difference in the wages or the living conditions?"

"Yes, well because here he was able to work more,

And he was able to earn a bit more,
You know, they had better salaries here,
In Arizona than in Texas,
Over there they paid him very little,
And then he worked mostly at night,
It was very difficult for him.”

This is where it is evident that there was, indeed, a level of poor verbal communication between Luis and Petra, because she claims he never said a thing regarding his like or dislike of being a Bracero. The lack of verbal communication does not keep Petra from knowing the tasks her husband did on a daily basis were strenuous. Because Petra was in close vicinity to her husband, she knew the hardships that came with being a Bracero, even if they were unspoken by both her and her husband, but the unspoken knowledge still was not enough for her to confidently say her husband did or did not enjoy his time as a Bracero.

Enjoying their time laboring was not part of Braceros’ main concerns. These men carried with them the responsibility of providing material resources for their families, and they felt obliged to do so in different ways than their wives did due to patriarchal ideals. In Mexico, the traditional roles of labor for men and women were heavily prevalent at that time with the man being seen as the only/main source of income for a family, and the woman as the primary caretaker of everyone in the family.³⁰ Men in working class families in Mexico were enforced to put their bodies through any physical labor necessary to keep their family alive because that validated their role as a husband and father, and the provider role could not be split. Women were also conditioned by their elders to think that working from the home was their only option.

³⁰ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 7-8.

Most women were not allowed to complete their education or work far from home if they were allowed to work at all. That being said, wives and daughters had to endure seeing their husbands and brothers come home with aching bodies- women were left to tend callused hands, burning skin, and breaking backs. Petra disclosed, “He said it was difficult, but said, ‘Well, I have to work.’” and just like that she had to let him go, and he felt compelled to continue laboring.

However, with the progression of the program, women began to look for ways to contribute to their family income as well, and that included petitioning for visas to enter into the United States.³¹ Women envisioned the combination between their remittances and their husband’s remittances would help their children live better lives through better housing and education.³² Some of the people that I listened to mentioned how their mom’s and sisters would sell tortillas or other food items, sew and sell clothing, clean houses, and even provide injections for the people in their communities.

The reasons why Petra kept her and her husband’s memories of the Bracero program remain a mystery, but what is known is that Luis worked long, arduous hours to be able to provide for his family. Though Petra was there for the time her husband was contracted, she still experienced her husband safeguarding his thoughts and feelings as Latino men often do for the sake of their family. Taking a look at Petra’s story exemplifies how with oral histories, there lies so much in what is said, but also what is left unsaid, and putting the pieces together takes active listening. Petra’s story with Luis begins with a dance, and ends with a marriage that endured unuttered challenges, and their story won’t be forgotten.

³¹ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 69.

³² Ibid.

CHAPTER III

CUAUHTÉMOC (TEMO) MADRID

La Resolucion

The way Temo approaches and processes his story by telling it, every detail, he would like the world to know.

“I want to tell the world, well,

I want to remember the moments we went through, because,

I think the blows in life,

make one tough,

they make you hard.”

For Cuauhtémoc, telling his story allows him to manage the hardships that he went through, and he acknowledges that for him, without sharing his experiences he would not be the same positive man.

Cuauhtémoc Madrid was born in 1929 in Pilares de Nacozari, Sonora, Mexico to a father dedicated to mining and a stay at home mom. Pilares was a multicultural town in Sonora due to the different mines that attracted Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, and Americans to settle there. Although he had twelve siblings and lived in a working-class house, Cuauhtémoc says he never went hungry or felt suffering because as long as there was beans and potatoes everything would be okay. Cuauhtémoc started working when he was nine years old washing dishes in a bar; he remembers barely being tall enough to reach the countertops. He was able to obtain a sixth-grade education. The need to make a living took Cuauhtémoc to many places where he could meet new people. Finally, when Cuauhtémoc found out about the Bracero Program, he saw it as both an

adventure and as a way to provide for himself and his family. Despite being too young to be in the Bracero Program, Cuauhtémoc waited in line for his first contract. While in line, Temo saw some men dressed in their Sunday's best whereas others were just in their regular everyday clothing. The way Temo made friends in line was by giving them food with the little bit of money he had saved up. They nicknamed Temo "Periquito" or little parrot, given that he loved to talk. Temo and his friends waited in line to be contracted for days, he tells us:

"Yes, we slept on the grass,
We would sleep holding each other's belts,
I would hold onto the belt of the man in front of me,
And the man behind me would hold onto mine,
That way, no one could take our place in line."

Once Temo got to the front of the line they asked him for signed paperwork, but because he was too young, he didn't have it. Temo's friends quickly started vouching for him,

"Please let him pass."
"Well, you have a pitiful face,
Go ahead."

And then the fumigation process started:

"In ten minutes,
They had us all naked in there.
Naked, they would examine our bodies,
They would check if we had a broken leg,
If we were missing any teeth,
If we were missing one eye,

Like when people go buy horses, like that,
And then you'd pass and put your clothes back on.
"There were medical exams inside,
There was a clinic, and we were so embarrassed to go,
Because we had to pass in front of young women.
I was full until we reached Nogales, Arizona,
We waited in line in Nogales, Arizona,
And they made us all go inside,
"You go there, and you over there, undress."
And then they put that pesticide for head lice on our head.
Yes, on our head and all the parts of the body."

Like Cuauhtémoc, every man who was waiting for a contract into the Bracero Program, had to go through a fumigation process where they were sprayed with harmful insecticides, a substance used for the direct killing of insects came in contact with their skin.³³ Not one Bracero was aware of the name of the chemical that was being sprayed onto their body, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane commonly known as DDT, whose use is now banned.³⁴ Braceros had to undress in front of other men whom they had never met before while the insecticide was sprayed all over their bodies, and their body inspections were not done in private either. If men were sent back because they had a health condition that deemed them unfit for a contract, the rest of the line watched them leave, almost like a walk of shame. Through Temo's comparison of his body inspection to a horse being inspected to be bought shows the level of

³³ "Dehumanization of Braceros", *The Bracero Program*, April 7, 2019, <https://thebraceroprogram.weebly.com/dehumanization.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

dehumanization experienced by Braceros right before they embarked on a completely foreign journey.

Temo's journey took him to Tucson, Arizona where he was assigned to pick cotton.

"And tell me, how did you learn to pick cotton, was there someone who trained you?"

"Well yes, there were a lot that arrived in groups and families,

There was one family,

One family who had a woman named Lupita,

And wow, I hope God preserved her,

She showed me, because her brothers became my friends,

She would tell me, "Look Perico, let's grab three grooves,

You grab the right or left,

And we leave one in the middle,

And we pick two by two...

When we finished I would laugh,

Because while I had 80 pounds, she had 110.

I would ask her, "How is it possible Lupita?"

We did everything the same speed and picked the same way,

But she said there was a trick.

She said she would teach me,

But she left the ranch before I could learn."

In the Bracero Program, men were not provided with formal training.³⁵ Instead, at inspection, their hands would be examined to discern whether they had strong, callused hands appropriate

³⁵ Cohen, *Braceros*, 51.

for agricultural work.³⁶ Many Braceros had previous experience with agriculture work, but the ones that did not simply learned along the way, like Temo.

He goes on to tell the circumstances that eventually led him to the end of his time as a Bracero:

“On December 31st, I got a telegram that said,

“Your dad is in grave condition, come if you can.”

And I could, it wasn’t very far,

And everyone believed me except for the owner of the ranch,

“You just want to spend the New Year in your town, don’t you?”

“No,” I told him, “I did not make up this telegram,

I didn’t even know my dad was sick.”

Temo explains that he was able to convince his boss that his dad was in grave condition, and he drove him to a town where he was able to catch a bus to get him to his last stop- his dad. Temo found his dad in agony, but he was able to recover from his grave state. Because it was New Year’s Day, Cuauhtémoc could not find a bus to take him back to Tucson any time soon, so he stuck around his hometown. He was never able to find a bus ride that would take him back in time for the cotton season to be prospering so he never contracted as a Bracero again. Eventually he bumped into an old friend who caught him up with news he had been missing out on:

“They stole your girlfriend,” he told me

Yes, they stole her.

Well, she got tired of waiting,

And she went with another man, right?

Then I started to think, what to do, what to do, what to do?

³⁶ Ibid, 52.

It was my intention to return,
I had my eyes on the woman who would help me pick,
But I never knew of her again.”

Unfortunately, Temo experienced the challenges of maintaining transnational relationships. In Mexico, his girlfriend did not wait for his return, and in the United States, he could not find a way to keep in contact with the woman he was interested in, Lupita. Modes of communication for Braceros were limited to writing letters, and a lot of the men were alphabetic so they relied on the Braceros who could write to relay messages to their family.³⁷

Cuauhtémoc describes what he and his friends did for fun when they had extra time:

“We worked every day except for Sunday,
But sometimes we took some time on Saturday evening,
“Hey, let’s go Dance in Coolidge!”
And we would go dance in Coolidge.
“At nights there was the movies and card games,
I never liked card games...
Nothing, I just rested.
Had dinner and got rest because it was nighttime,
We had to wake up really early again,
And poom, poom, poom,
We had to go work,
Hard and solid.
I never knew of any other type of job there.

³⁷ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 54.

Leisure time was not always available to Braceros because they worked long hours ranging from five to seven days a week, but on the weeks where they had the weekend off, going into town to dance was an activity a lot of them enjoying doing. In the *bailes* the braceros could let loose and sing and dance and have a beer or two or more. Sex workers were also a part of the spare time Braceros allotted to pleasure- sometimes they would go into agricultural camps at night in trucks, and drive away if any police were suspected of being close by.³⁸ Temo, however, shares that he was too tired to do anything besides rest. With how much he worked, it would make sense for Temo to be able to save money, but he previously Erasmo said, “They paid us a miserable amount every Friday.”

“What would you do with the money you earned?”

“What money?

If anything, I barely had enough for food,

Or a pair of pants...”

Cuauhtémoc explained that the remittances he would send back home did not amount to a lot, because he had to keep most of the money to sustain himself in the United States. He says, “If I had ten dollars, well one would be for my house and nine would be for me.”

Temo does a good job in expressing his opinion on every aspect of the Bracero Program:

“In your opinion, what do you think of the Bracero Program? Was it a good program?”

“It should resume, the problems in the fields here were going to end,

There should be a program where there are temporary visas,

So that you could come and work and go back whenever you wanted to.”

³⁸ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 81.

Temo was aware of the fact that though the program provided a source of income for these men, they were also limited to the spaces they could work in, and they also lacked freedom in terms of the chance to migrate circularly as much as they wanted to. Once they went back to Mexico, getting contracted once more was not guaranteed, unless your employer specifically ensured that the job position would be available.

“In the case of the program at 1942, what is your opinion?”

“There were a lot of injustices,

A lot of injustices,

Because at that time, there were many like my friend Armando,

“No”, he said, “I came back after a month”, he said,

“In a month I went back to Mexico,

They gave us one of those big barrels to bathe in a group.

And the barrel was full of contaminated water,

We opened the faucet, and a bunch of red ants fell on my back,”

He said, “Do you think I really want to continue the Bracero Program?”

And for us, we showered whenever we wanted to...”

“So how was the program for you? Was it good? Did it help you in any way?”

“Economically, no, no, economically no.

The clothes I would wear was the only thing I had...”

“Would you like to say an anecdote that happened to you or one of your friends during the Bracero Program?”

“Armando said... “No, I don’t even want to save the memories of what happened,

If you think the bosses in Mexico treat you badly,

Go work in a ranch in Arizona, or Texas, or California,
Because you can work sun out to sun down,
And they won't repay you,
They won't repay you with anything.
The day your contract ends, it's goodbye. Like that."
"So, there are some people who did not get treated well?"
"No, no,
There are a lot who do not even want to remember those times,
But there are some like me, right?
I am a free thinker,
And not even that free,
Because I go to mass every Sunday.
I give thanks to God for every day I get,
And for placing me in the paths I have taken.
...In the end everything turned out fine."
"Tell me, what does it feels like when someone calls you a Bracero? What does it mean to you?"

"I feel proud,
Because Bracero refers to *brazo*,
Because at the time we were the arms of this country.
A brilliant thing that Temo does is to incorporate the stories of other friends in his own narrative in order to give a more well-rounded view of what it meant to be a Bracero. While Cuauhtémoc's employer made sure his employee's living conditions were appropriate, his friend

Armando experienced a complete lack of regard for their comfort and safety. For Cuauhtémoc, being a Bracero was associated with being a help to a country, while other men saw the working conditions as exploitative tactics employers could use to get away with paying men very little for working so much. Even though he is proud to be a bracero, Temo still understands why it would be difficult for other men to talk about what they went through. Cuauhtémoc's story shows that the correlation between talking about the experience as a Bracero is directly proportional to whether or not the experience was a positive or negative one. With evidence from Temo's friend Armando, talking about the program causes a lot of negative emotions to arise, and Temo says, "There are a lot who do not want to remember those times." However, Temo calls himself a "free thinker" and being a free thinker allows him to take all of the stories he knows about the Bracero Program and find the space in his mind to make sense of it as something he can be proud of.

The interview ends with Temo displaying feelings of gratitude:

"Thank you, we appreciate your time and the stories you have shared with us."

"No, thank you and everyone in company."

"Alright with this, we have finished our interview."

"Yes, that's fine,

Thanks for everything, okay?"

As they thank Temo for sharing his stories, he thanks the interviewer for giving him the platform to share what otherwise would have gone unheard. When Mireya Loza conducted the interviews for the Bracero History Archive she told the men, "I can record your story and make sure that it's safe, so that no one will forget." and that was enough to get so many men who had been hesitant, to tell their stories in the respective ways they could- not everyone can be a Temo. Remembering

their stories shouldn't be something Braceros do on their own, their stories should be remembered by many people so the weight of them becomes lighter, so their stories can travel far.

CONCLUSION

I started this project because I was introduced to the Bracero Program in a couple of my Latinx Studies classes, and I realized that people who were not taking these classes would probably never be aware the program even existed. It frustrated me to know this twenty-year span of U.S. history was not part of the national narrative and I wanted to change that. I began to think about what makes stories powerful enough to touch many people, so I looked to my professors' methods of teaching the Bracero Program to help me out. I noticed that the most impactful part of the lessons for the students was watching videos of Braceros talking about their first-hand experience in the program. Students cried, asked questions, and were able to contextualize the statistics on the working and living conditions Braceros endured. It was no longer about a policy, but about people. And that's what I wanted to bring forth. I was also simply interested in listening to these stories because these people were important to me, as a Mexican woman I felt it was my duty to uncover and honor their stories.

Within these pages are only three stories of the hundreds that are out there for people to listen and learn. I encourage anyone reading this to not only listen to the oral histories, but to retell them to friends and family because that's how little by little we can all build a collective history to not only honor the braceros, but make sure we look at this history when analyzing current policies that affect immigrants and migrant workers. Erasmo and Petra prove that breaking the silence that surrounds the Bracero program can be hard work, but it can be a crucial tool used to prevent more people from experiencing exploitation and violence. In this current time in history, using our voices is especially critical, so *sigue adelante*, and use it effectively.

You too can be a *periquito* like Temo, and challenge the narrative behind what is considered to be U.S. history.

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